

## William Holcombe /

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### **WILLIAM HOLCOMBE.\***

\* Read at the monthly meeting of the Executive Council, May 13, 1901. In the absence of the author, a granddaughter of Lieutenant Governor Holcombe, this paper was read by Hon, Henry L. Moss.

BY MRS. ANDREW E. KILPATRICK.

As one who came to the Northwest before Minnesota had any political existence, a sketch of William Holcombe may be of interest to those who would perpetuate the memory of the pioneers who helped to make this state.

William Holcombe was born at Lambertville, N. J., July 22, 1804, the oldest of the eight children of Emley Holcombe and Mary Skillman. His direct ancestor, John Holcombe, with a brother, Jacob, came to America with William Penn on his second voyage in 1700, landing at Philadelphia with other members of the Society of Friends, and living there for several years. He bought a tract of 350 acres of land, in or near what is now Lambertville, N. J., where he and his wife, Elizabeth Woolrich, settled and raised a family of sons and daughters, who with their descendants remained there for a hundred years. They intermarried among the Barber, Emley, Lawrence, and other good old English families, some of whom were Friends. On the Skillman, or maternal side, William Holcombe was a direct descendant of that William Beekman who came to the New Netherlands with Governor Stuyvesant in 1647, and who purchased Corlear's Hook, afterward known as Crown Point, and of Claes Arente Van Veghte, an equally early and honorable resident of New Amsterdam. In all lines were representative men, assemblymen and persons of

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note in the community, representatives to the Continental Congress, and soldiers in the Continental Army, "Friends" though many of them were.

It is not surprising, then, that William, following the traditions and instincts of his forefathers, should early seek for a 858 more enlarged field than the limits of the ancestral home seemed to furnish. According to the invariable custom of the Society of Friends, he was bred to a trade, that of carriage maker, which he appears to have followed for a time.

At the age of eighteen he moved to Utica, N. Y., then on the verge of civilization, where the only event of importance we have concerning him is the record of his marriage, July 30, 1826, to Martha, daughter of Jacob Wilson, at Sullivan, Madison county, N. Y. It is possible that they were remote connections, as Jacob Wilson's mother was a Holcombe.

Another move westward in 1829, brought William to Ohio where he dwelt first in Columbus, later in Cincinnati. In each place a son was born, and in the latter, then a thriving town of ten thousand inhabitants, he owned a large carriage factory; but in 1835, the westward movement still possessing him, he proceeded onward to St. Louis, a place of five thousand people at that time. While there, he was a member of the firm of Strother, Holcombe & Co., which, among other investments, bought a steamboat and named it "Olive Branch," from the family crest of the Holcombes, and William became its captain. During his residence in Ohio he had become deeply concerned in spiritual things and united with the Presbyterian Church. He exemplified his piety, and consistently carried out his principles, by refusing to run his boat on Sunday.

On the first trip from St. Louis to Galena, when Saturday evening arrived the boat was tied up to the bank at sundown, there to remain until the same hour on Sunday, in spite of the remonstrances of the passengers, who, many of them, left her, and proceeded on their way by another steamer, only to be stuck upon a sandbar and to have the mortification of seeing the "Olive Branch" pass them before their destination was reached.

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This policy was pursued through the entire season, and dire financial results were predicted from following such a course; but Captain Holcombe afterward told, with much satisfaction, that his boat made one more trip than any other, and almost paid for herself in the season.

The residence in St. Louis was brief, and, in 1836, we find him in Galena, Illinois, where his young wife died and was buried. It was on a visit to this place ten years later that he met and married his second wife. Meantime he had moved on, still seeking the frontier, to the valley of the St. Croix, and in 1839 settled permanently at Stillwater, then a portion of Wisconsin Territory.

Here he commenced the development of the lumbering interest, and was engaged in steamboating and other commercial pursuits, and, at the same time, was deeply interested in the moral and social welfare of the struggling settlements upon the frontier. In 1846, he was a member of the first Constitutional Convention of Wisconsin, and there gained the reputation which he always maintained of a sound political economist and a thoroughly radical Democrat.

In 1847, William Holcombe married Mrs. Henrietta King Clendenin, a native of Toledo, Ohio, and widow of Lieutenant Clendenin, U. S. A., a refined and cultured woman, rather proud and distant, whose translation to the hardships of a frontier town was a very trying experience for her. Their first home was on the borders of Lake St. Croix, on what is now the main street of Stillwater, and their earliest visitors were Indians and "loggers."

In 1848, he was secretary of the first convention held in Stillwater for the purpose of organizing a new Territory. A few days after this convention adjourned, a letter was written by General Sibley and Mr. Holcombe to Hon. John Catlin of Madison, Wis., "submitting to him the proposition that the division of Wisconsin Territory and the admission of a portion thereof as a State into the Union did not disfranchise that portion outside of the state boundaries...Mr. Catlin at once responded...coinciding with their views on the

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question” (quoted from “Last Days of Wisconsin Territory and Early Days of Minnesota Territory,” by Hon. Henry L. Moss, in Volume VIII of this Society's Collections). “He was one of five to petition Congress to strike off a certain part of the then Territory of Wisconsin not included in the then State of Wisconsin, to be called the Territory of Minnesota.”

Later he held for four years the position of Receiver of the Land Office at Stillwater, a very important position at that time. His son Edwin was his clerk and recorded the original town plats of the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and these two laid out what is known as Holcombe's Addition to St. Paul, one of its most beautiful residence districts, lying between Summit and Dayton avenues, west of Dale street. Mr. Holcombe also laid out Holcombe's Addition to Stillwater.

“In 1857, he was a member of the convention which formed 860 the Constitution of Minnesota, and took an active part in the deliberations. The record of the debates shows that in all provisions for public education, the preservation of the school fund, and kindred subjects, he manifested the greatest interest.”

“In 1858, upon the organization of the State, he was elected the first Lieutenant Governor, an office which he held for two years. As President of the Senate, he was not only distinguished for ripe experience and ability, but for remarkable dignity of manner and unflinching courtesy under all circumstances.”

After his retirement from this office, he became an active member of the State Normal School Board, and filled many other public offices; but, to quote the words of Rev. J. G. Riheldaffer in a minute recorded at a meeting of the Presbyterian Synod in St. Paul, October 3, 1870, “That which lay nearest to his heart was the Church of Christ.”

“He was largely instrumental in the organization of the First Church of Stillwater, in which he served as an elder up to the organization of the Second Church, and the latter was built and sustained largely by his individual efforts and means. He was President of the Minnesota Bible Society, and also President of the State Sabbath School Association.” We

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may add, in proof of the very vital assistance rendered by Lieutenant Governor Holcombe to the Second Church of Stillwater, that after his death it languished and the edifice was sold in a few years and the congregation dispersed.

In 1856, Mr. Holcombe built what was for those days a fine mansion on a six-acre tract of land on the banks of Lily Lake, then in the suburbs of Stillwater. Opposite his gate lies a park, donated by him to the city; and across the lake, on the hills, he owned a farm, now the Lily Lake Driving Park. At his home profuse hospitality was dispensed to all who chose to come, friends and strangers sharing alike of his abundance, though the surest way to his heart was found by the members of his beloved church. Public man though he was, his home was the center of his life, and his great pleasure was to fill it with friends and kindred.

It was here that William Holcombe was stricken fatally by apoplexy on the night of September 5, 1870, and his family had barely time to rush to his assistance, when his spirit passed away in prayer. At the time of his death he was Mayor of Stillwater, 861 having inaugurated and carried on many public improvements which make the city accessible and beautiful to-day. He was also Superintendent of the Public Schools.

No railroads reached Stillwater at that time, but from the adjacent country old friends and admirers flocked to do honor to their foremost citizen, and, in spite of pouring rain and bad country roads, school children and their elders alike in procession attended the remains to their last resting place in Fairview Cemetery.

Mr. Holcombe was a charter member of the St. John's Lodge No. 1 of the Masonic Order in Stillwater, organized in 1849, and was buried with the rites of the order.

A portrait of him in early youth, painted in oils, now in the possession of his grandson, Edwin R. Holcombe of St. Paul, shows a fine, strong, yet tender face, gray eyes, and curling, bright brown hair of that peculiar chestnut tint which retains the color late in life. A later portrait, taken when he was lieutenant governor, shows the hair thinned by

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time though still dark, and the mobile mouth compressed into firmer lines, but withal the kindness is still apparent.

The Dutch and English blood were traceable not only in his appearance but in his disposition, a blending of sturdy common sense, firmness, and independence, tempered by a most loving heart toward all humanity. He was gentle and peace-loving, his "Quaker" training rendering him always a non-combatant, yet he was a man of strong convictions and unyielding in upholding what he thought to be right.

A young man in a new country, through material prosperity and political struggles and successes, he established and maintained a name honored for scrupulous integrity in all his dealings.

Of William Holcombe's two sons who both survived him, the elder, William Wilson Holcombe, died in 1889, leaving a married son. The second, Edwin Van Buren Holcombe, was a resident of St. Paul the greater part of his life, married Miss Adele Soulard of an old St. Louis family, and died in St. Paul in 1899, stricken suddenly as was his father, and at the same age. Edwin is survived by his widow, a son Edwin, and a married daughter (the writer of this sketch). His second son, who was named William for Lieutenant Governor Holcombe, passed away before his father.